From Teletypes to the Internet: Sports and the Media

By Alex Macaulay*

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With two seconds left and a one-point lead in a triple-overtime game against the Kansas Jayhawks, University of North Carolina point guard Tommy Kearns flung the basketball high into the air. When the ball came down from the rafters of the Kansas City (Missouri) Municipal Auditorium, the game was over. The Tar Heels had won the 1957 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's championship, 54–53, and completed a perfect 32–0 season.

Hundreds of miles away, folks throughout North Carolina switched off television sets and went outside to celebrate. School and firehouse bells rang out, as people lit bonfires and danced in the streets. Thousands would greet the team when it arrived at the local airport.

That March 1957 championship game helped transform North Carolina into a basketball state. Millions of fans began flocking to the sport. They were drawn by the players' on-court success—and by the exciting new opportunity to watch the action live, on television.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, before radio or TV, North Carolinians remained mostly participants in athletics rather than spectators. They were just beginning to follow their favorite athletes and teams by attending local events. Fans also read about the action a day or two later in the newspapers. Unable to receive and send information as quickly as we do now, sports reporters focused on contests closer to home. They wrote about high school, college, and industrial league basketball; high school and college football; professional wrestling; and especially baseball of all kinds.

Lacking a Major League Baseball team of their own, fans in the Tar Heel State devoted themselves to church, industrial, and minor leagues. Major-league box scores and results did appear in most newspapers, but local sportswriters could not offer firsthand reports of games in places such as Chicago, New York, or St. Louis. Reporters in Raleigh and Charlotte instead covered the city "Sunday School Circuits" in vivid detail. Into the 1920s, baseball minor leaguers like "Jersey Joe" Stripp of the Charlotte Hornets often received as much publicity as national icons such as Walter "Big Train" Johnson of the Washington Senators.

Eventually, news agencies started making better use of the information carried across national wire services like the Associated Press. Teletypes could send the work of a single reporter out for publication or broadcast by many other media outlets. Teletypes were printing machines that looked like typewriters and could transmit typed messages electronically from Washington, D.C., to Wilmington and even overseas. The machines helped Tar Heel State newspapers expand their coverage of national and international events.

North Carolinians joined other Americans in marveling at the football exploits of Red "The Galloping Ghost" Grange. People living in Durham and Asheville kept up with tennis stars Suzanne Leglen and Helen Wills when they played in London and Paris. They followed golfers Walter Hagen at the World Championship in England and Bobby Jones at the British Open in Scotland. In August 1926 *Charlotte Observer* headlines announced that Gertrude Ederle had become the first woman to swim the English Channel, with a time that bested all the men who had done it.

Such stories pulled North Carolina into the national sports orbit, but newspapers still kept their local touch. The Charlotte Hornets' sweep of the Macon Peaches in minor-league baseball competition shared top billing in 1924 with the Olympics. In one paper, those same Olympics received barely more attention than the annual N.C. Checker Association tournament.

About this same time, news outlets in North Carolina began experimenting with radio broadcasts of athletic contests. Via radio, thousands of listeners "attended" the Armistice Day open-wheel car race held at the Charlotte Speedway in 1925. Several fans pointed out that "the hum of the motors could be clearly heard." College football and professional baseball games also aired over the radio. Some people worried that this new form of communication would encourage fans to stay home and listen to sports, instead of paying for a ticket to watch in person. Others feared that live, play-by-play broadcasts—of college football games in particular—got people too excited. This "unrestrained hullabaloo," they thought, put too much pressure on athletes. It led the public to take games too seriously.

Television would have stunned such critics of radio. TV changed not only *how* North Carolinians watched sports but which sports they watched. For the first half of the 1900s, basketball had lagged behind baseball and college football in terms of coverage and fan interest. This shifted after World War II. The rivalries and media attention surrounding the state's "Big Four" colleges—Duke, North Carolina, North Carolina State, and Wake Forest—intensified. From 1949 to 1960, these four teams participated in an annual holiday basketball tournament called the Dixie Classic. The Raleigh event pitted them against four other teams from throughout the nation. Sold-out crowds at State's Reynolds Coliseum watched, while radio announcer Ray Reeves called the

games for the Tobacco Road Sports Network. North Carolinians welcomed the "unity of pride" that came as people from across the state and elsewhere followed the action over the radio—and eventually through television.

The event that really drew most of the state and nation to basketball was the 1957 NCAA championship game. Although the NCAA finals had been broadcast nationally since 1954, most networks and stations did not show the game despite its availability. They stuck with their traditional nonsports programming—airing comedies, westerns, and dramas. About three-fourths of American families did own a TV by this time. But the percentage was lower in North Carolina, which remained quite rural.

North Carolinians' enthusiasm grew with each Tar Heel win in 1957. A television executive named C. D. Chesley quickly arranged for the NCAA semifinal and final games to be shown live across the state. His efforts paid off. Families, friends, and neighbors crowded around their shared 21- to 24-inch, black-and-white television sets to watch as the Tar Heels won in triple overtime over Michigan State in the semifinals. One young fan later remembered "sitting up both nights, watching those two triple-overtime games, and just going nuts in the process." He added, "I think my parents got hooked on basketball because of the television. I know I did." Executives at Pilot Life Insurance in Greensboro hoped to profit from this growing popularity. They agreed to sponsor live broadcasts of 10 Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) games for the 1958 season.

Coverage of college basketball—and sports in general—has expanded rapidly since then. With cable and satellite TV, along with "all sports, all the time" channels such as ESPN (officially the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network), fans from Hawaii to Maine can watch their teams play regularly. The invention of computers, and then the Internet and related technology, has added to the public's ability to follow, and debate, every detail.

Each North Carolina school's success in the NCAA men's basketball tournament has increased its national profile. In 1983 the N.C. State Wolfpack became the underdog darling—and eventual winner—of the tournament now known by its "March Madness" nickname. Coach Jim Valvano later said, "We figured in our run to the championship over 250 million people saw us play on TV. I never realized we had touched so many lives."

Modern TV networks make many efforts to add to a viewer's experience. They use slow motion, replays, close-ups, and multiple camera angles. Like critics of radio so many years before, some people have worried that such innovations could hurt ticket sales. In some ways, fans get closer to the action while sitting in their living rooms, rather than in a stadium or arena. This loss of spectator interest has not developed when it comes to

basketball in North Carolina. In fact, rowdy crowds like Duke's "Cameron Crazies" sometimes become as entertaining as the games themselves.

One impact that TV has had on sports in North Carolina and elsewhere involves money. The ACC's current deal with ESPN runs 12 years and is worth about $1.86 billion. Competition for money and TV attention increases the pressure on coaches and athletes to win, at all costs. TV forces schools to alter schedules. Network television focuses on "big time" programs and "big money" sports such as basketball and football—leaving smaller schools and less popular sports behind. Talk radio shows and cable TV broadcasts bombard us with everything from bull riding to bowling to spelling bees. Online message boards let anonymous (and sometimes angry) fans criticize coaching decisions and player performance publicly. Such discussion happens minutes after, and even during, games.

Just as some people criticized sports on the radio, many believe that modern society and its technology place too much meaning on contests intended to be enjoyable and entertaining. They fear that Americans have developed an unhealthy obsession with sports and the people who play them. Others point to positive things that have always been part of athletics, such as teamwork, community, and overcoming challenges. Such debates are not new but merely part of the ever-changing ways that we view sports.

**At the time of this article's publication, Alex Macaulay was associate professor of history at Western Carolina University. He was teaching courses on the American South and on sports in American history. Macaulay earned a PhD from the University of Georgia and has published a post–World War II history of The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina:* Marching in Step.